

Message Text

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71

ACTION NEA-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-11 INR-10 LAB-06

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EO 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, ELAB, CE

SUBJ: SRI LANKA PLANTATION WORKERS ON STRIKE

1. FOLLOWING MONTHS OF DESULTORY DISCUSSIONS WITH GSL ON QUESTION OF GUARANTEED MONTHLY WAGE FOR TAMIL ESTATE WORKERS, CEYLON WORKERS CONGRESS (CWC) LAUNCHED "TOKEN STRIKE" DEC 18, CLOSING DOWN MOST OF SRI LANKA'S TEA ESTATES. ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED TO LAST ONLY THREE DAYS, SCOPE OF STRIKE AND PRESSURE FROM WORKERS HAVE NOW PUSHED IT INTO ITS SECOND WEEK. ALTHOUGH DENOUNCED BY GOVERNMENT AS "POLITICALLY MOTIVATED" AND "ANTI-NATIONAL", STRIKE HAS PROVED EMBARRASSING TO PRO-GOVERNMENT UNIONS WHOSE MEMBERS REPORTEDLY HAVE SUPPORTED STRIKE OVERWHELMINGLY. THIS HAS LED SEVERAL NORMALLY PRO-GOVERNMENT PLANTATION UNIONS TO COME OUT IN SUPPORT OF STRIKE FOLLOWING THEIR EARLIER DENUNCIATION OF IT.

2. AT STAKE IS LONG-STANDING QUEST FOR MONTHLY WAGE FOR TEA WORKERS AND DEMAND FOR LARGER FOOD RATIONS. WHILE RATIONS HAVE BEEN SLIGHTLY INCREASED IN RECENT WEEKS, FINMIN N.M PERERA IN 20 DEC STATEMENT IN PARLIAMENT APPARENTLY RULED OUT MONTHLY WAGE. AS IN PREVIOUS LABOR CONFLICTS, PERERA'S TROTSKYITE LANKA SAMAJA PARTY (LSSP) REPORTEDLY IS TAKING HARD LINE, REFLECTING GOVERNMENT'S FEAR THAT CONCESSIONS TO CWC PRESSURE WILL SET PRECEDENT FOR OTHER UNIONS. CWC SOURCES PREDICT EARLY END TO STRIKE, PERHAPS WITHIN DAY OR TWO, AS WORKERS EXHAUST FOOD STOCKS AND GOVERNMENT'S RELATIVELY CALM

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REACTION SO FAR APPEARS BASED ON CALCULATION THAT TIME IS

RUNNING OUT FOR STRIKERS. EVEN IF STRIKE IS DEVOID OF CON-
CRETE RESULTS, CWC SAYS IT WILL TAKE COMFORT IN ITS STRONG
SHOWING, ESPECIALLY IN EXPOSING WEAKNESS OF RIVAL, PRO-
GOVERNMENT UNIONS.

3. COMMENT: CONTRAST IS STRONG BETWEEN WORKERS' GRIEVANCES
WHICH HAVE FUELED A TWO WEEKS' STRIKE AND THE MANEUVER-AS-
USUAL ATTITUDE OF UNION LEADERSHIP. THIS DICHOTOMY GOES FAR
TO EXPLAIN THE INABILITY OF SRI LANKA'S ONCE-POWERFUL TRADE
UNION MOVEMENT TO FORCE SETTLEMENT ON GSL.
BYRNE

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